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## Mental Health Challenges and Leadership Resilience of Principals in Rural South African Schools

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**Abstract:** This study explored principals' daily lives in rural South African high schools associated with their mental health problems and coping strategies. The study employed qualitative research methods. Moreover, the interpretivist paradigm and phenomenological method were used in this study. Data were collected from a convenience sample of 15 high school principals through a qualitative questionnaire. Data were then analysed through thematic analysis. Findings suggest that the mental health of principals is affected by various factors: workloads; teachers' and learners' discipline; child-headed families; socio-economic status of families; alcohol abuse; parental involvement; teenage pregnancy; and inadequate resources. To cope with these challenges, participants utilise personal coping mechanisms, such as social interaction and physical activities, to promote physical well-being. The results are aligned with the conservation of resources (COR) theory, transactional stress theory, and the Ubuntu philosophy that were utilised to establish the context of the study. These findings justify the need for multi-level practical frameworks to develop a policy which supports culturally responsive paradigms aimed at improving principals' leadership resilience and educational outcomes. The study recommends interventions, such as training programmes, to promote mental well-being and leadership resilience of principals.

**Keywords:** leadership resilience; mental health; rural schools; school principals; South Africa

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### Introduction

According to the World Health Organisation (2022), mental health is a state of well-being in which every individual can realise their potential, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively, and contribute to their community. Accordingly, school principals' mental health and leadership resilience directly impact educational outcomes and the stability of their schools. Moreover, schools are shaped by principals, who foster academic excellence and a supportive learning environment. However, a principal's role in a school is often characterised by high stress levels and significant psychological strain, particularly in rural schools (Mofokeng, 2019). As highlighted by Smit (2017), school leaders play a crucial role

in addressing challenges and transforming schools in rural areas. According to Mofokeng (2019), rural schools refer to schools or institutions of learning situated in rural environments. Similarly, Maila and Ross (2018) described rural schools as disadvantaged schools. Poti et al. (2014) stressed that rural schools are geographically isolated, under-resourced, have underqualified teachers, and have a small enrolment size. In addition, these authors identified the geographic remoteness of rural schools as an impediment to effective networking and curriculum delivery. Furthermore, Shikalepo (2020) identified several factors that negatively affect the quality of public rural schools. Among others, these factors include a lack of basic sanitation infrastructure, inadequate physical resources, lack of electricity, lack of information and communication technology, a lack of water, and inadequate roads and transport (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019).

Therefore, the mental health of principals in rural schools is further exacerbated by peculiar challenges such as a lack of resources, poverty, minimal parental involvement in children's education, limited funding, under-qualified educators, and multi-grade teaching (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Myende & Maifala, 2020; Ngozwana et al., 2024). Additionally, Smit (2017) highlighted that rural schools face complex challenges, such as health issues and social predicaments that affect the daily operation of schools. Moreover, rural principals are particularly vulnerable due to the additional socio-economic challenges, community issues, and systemic resource deficits (Day et al., 2021). These conditions tend to increase stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion, further complicating leadership functions (Moloi & Bush, 2021). Additionally, school principals evidently face increasing demands, accountability pressures and various resource constraints. Accordingly, mental health is impacted by such pressures, which affect their overall effectiveness and school performance (Leithwood et al., 2020). It is, therefore, imperative that principals are resilient in such school environments, as individuals with resilience are able to cope with adversity in a positive manner (Breedt et al., 2023). According to Herrman et al. (2011), resilience refers to protective factors and mechanisms, which contribute to a successful outcome even when facing stressful situations. Witmer 2019 described resilience as the capacity to manage challenges intended to disrupt a process. Indeed, due to these dynamics, principals must be resilient in order to lead rural schools successfully.

For this reason, Smit (2017) proposed that leaders of rural schools in South Africa be given attention and support as they face numerous extraordinary challenges. Therefore, a systematic examination of leadership resilience and principals' mental health is very important in strengthening educational leadership in rural schools and contributing to systemic issues. Principals' leadership resilience could also result in better-run schools, improved student performance, and healthier school environments. Research acknowledges the demanding nature of school leadership, the intersection between principals' mental health, and leadership resilience; however, disadvantaged school contexts remain underexplored. Most leadership resilience studies focus on general school settings and do not adequately account for the compounded pressures faced by principals in under-resourced schools characterised by socio-economic inequality, community instability, and limited institutional support. Therefore, there is limited theoretical understanding of how principals simultaneously navigate psychological stress, resource constraints, and community expectations. This study explored principals' experiences of mental health challenges and leadership resilience in rural South African schools. The study also aimed to answer the research questions "What are the mental health concerns principals face in rural schools, and what resilience strategies do principals employ to deal with their mental health challenges?"

To analyse these challenges, a theoretical lens is required that captures both the psychological and contextual dimensions of leadership resilience. Principals in disadvantaged schools simultaneously manage personal stress, systemic resource constraints, and community expectations. However, a single theoretical perspective cannot fully capture these multiple dimensions. Therefore, this study integrates three complementary perspectives: the conservation of resources (COR) theory, the transactional stress theory, and the Ubuntu philosophy. Together, these frameworks enable an examination of resilience at psychological, systemic, and cultural levels.

## **Theoretical framework**

In Hobfoll's (2001) conservation of resources (COR) theory, individuals experience stress when their psychological, social, and material resources are threatened, lost, or not adequately replenished. Although the theory offers insightful explanations of principals' stress coping in high-stress environments, the theory is very individualistic and may undermine collective and relational forms of resilience that are common in collectivist environments such as South Africa. Social networks and communal practices tend to nurture vulnerable school communities (Theron, 2016; Van Breda, 2018). Due to its strict focus on individual resource management, the COR theory

might not notice Ubuntu-based strategies towards resilience in township and rural schools, such as problem-solving collectively and caring for each other. The COR theory remains helpful, nevertheless, for understanding how principals interpret and act on day-to-day resource losses and gains. Furthermore, this perspective is particularly relevant in disadvantaged schools, where principals often face chronic shortages of financial, human, and infrastructural resources.

The transactional stress theory, developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), is adamant in its position regarding the cognitive appraisal process in individuals' perceptions and ability to cope with stressors. While offering valuable insight into individuals' level of adaptive coping, overindication of personal perception and underrepresentation of systemic and contextual sources of stress are referred to as drawbacks by the critics. This limitation is particularly relevant within the South African schooling environments, where principals are subject to ongoing structural challenges, such as resource inequalities, policy violations, and infrastructural shortcomings, which are not within their personal sphere of influence (Bhana & Pillay, 2021; Moosa & Bhana, 2020). Accordingly, unlike acute stressors that can be re-evaluated cognitively, these chronic circumstances call for system-level remedies. However, in this study, the transactional stress theory is useful for studying how principals perceive day-to-day pressures and create coping mechanisms within these broader constraints. In contrast to acute stressors that can be cognitively responded to, persistent conditions require systemic responses. However, it remains useful to analyse how principals cope with these broader constraints by using the transactional stress theory. In the context of school leadership, principals continuously evaluate the pressures associated with administrative demands, community expectations, and learner welfare. Their resilience is, therefore, shaped not only by external conditions but also by how these pressures are perceived and managed.

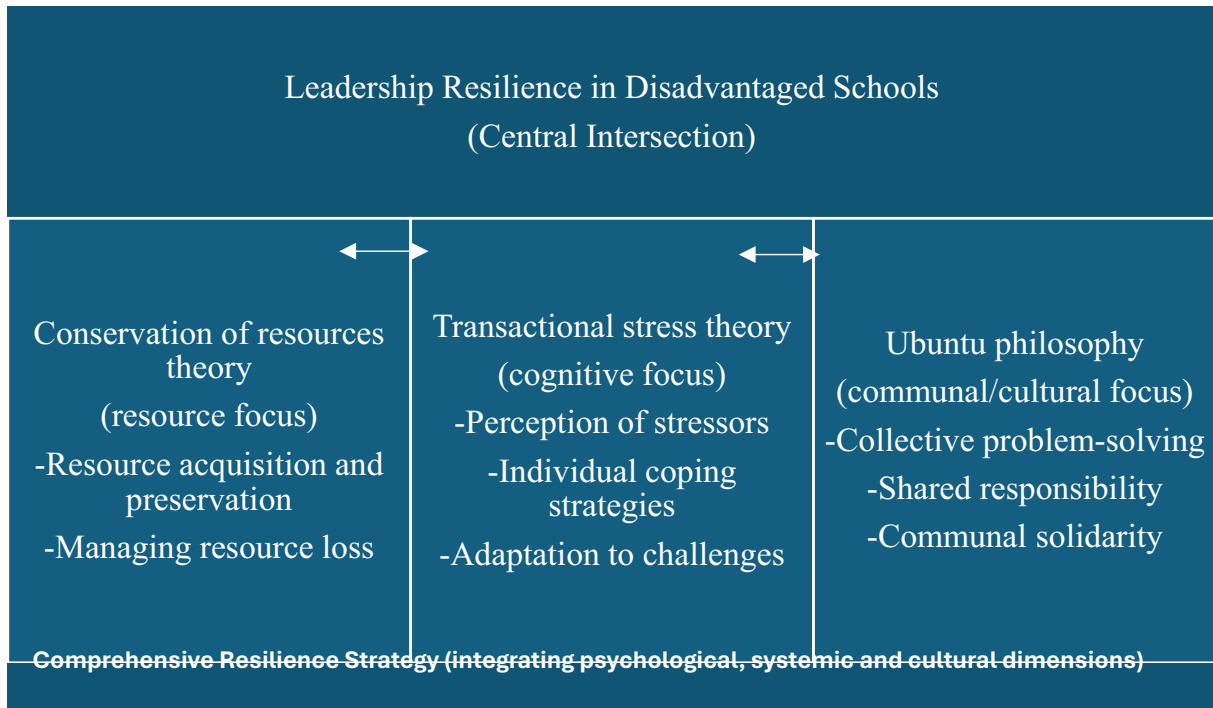
In many African societies, the Ubuntu philosophy emphasises relational accountability, communal solidarity, and collective problem-solving (Nussbaum, 2003). These values were particularly reflected in underprivileged school settings, where principals can draw on collaborative responses and inherent social networks of support to overcome hurdles. Although Ubuntu's culturally entrenched emphasis on resilience, critics argue that it is not operationally specific and, thus, it becomes difficult to implement measurable strategies or policy guidelines (Munyaka & Motlhabi, 2009). While the COR theory and the transactional stress theory provide insight into stress and coping strategies, they do not fully capture the relational and communal dimensions of leadership within African contexts. The Ubuntu philosophy emphasises interconnectedness, collective responsibility, and relational leadership (Nussbaum, 2003). Therefore, in disadvantaged schools, principals frequently rely on community collaboration, peer support, and shared responsibility to sustain leadership effectiveness.

Cumulatively, these theories provide a unifying theory that addresses the psychological (transactional stress theory), systemic (COR theory), and cultural dimensions of resilience (Ubuntu philosophy). This theory enhances the applicability and generalisability of South Africa's disadvantaged school principals' resilience strategies by bridging these theories. The conservation of resources theory, the transactional stress theory, and the Ubuntu philosophy are integrated in Figure 1. This is a conceptualisation of a comprehensive resilience framework tailored to educational leadership in disadvantaged school environments. Nonetheless, a different approach to coping is taken by each theory: COR emphasises resource management, while transactional stress theory focuses on individual appraisal, and Ubuntu philosophy emphasises social support and collective problem-solving. Through the intersection of these dimensions, leadership resilience can be built and sustained holistically. Resilience is built through a combination of psychological, systemic, and cultural dimensions in disadvantaged educational environments, as depicted by the arrows.

## **Literature review**

### ***Mental health of educational leaders***

Research on educational leadership has consistently shown that principals have a significant impact on school effectiveness and student achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Principals, especially those from low-resourced schools, are continually faced with more demanding pressures, such as increasing accountability demands, relentless policy change, and socio-economic challenges (Leithwood et al., 2020). These pressures too often result in serious mental health concerns, such as chronic stress, anxiety, burnout and emotional exhaustion (Day et al., 2021). Further research highlights that principals' mental health directly impacts their capacity for effective leadership, decision-making and overall school performance (Leithwood et al., 2020). Teachers and educational leaders have been reported to be at risk for a range of mental disorders, resulting from unfavourable working conditions. Other factors and pressures that contribute to mental disorders include high teaching load, discipline



**Figure 1.** Intersection of COR Theory, Transactional Stress Theory, and Ubuntu Philosophy  
 Source: Authors' conception

challenges in the classroom, frequent work-related policy changes (Maphalala, 2014), and exposure to verbal and physical bullying by learners (Woudstra et al., 2018). These challenges lead to fear and uneasiness that frequently translate to anxiety. The persistence of these adverse conditions results in low morale and poor mental health. Additionally, there appear to be overcrowded classrooms in many schools situated in low socio-economic areas (Meier & West, 2020; Ntsala et al., 2021). Accordingly, these factors, if not properly managed, could lead to stress-related disorders that are likely to deteriorate the professional capabilities of principals, while negatively influencing staff morale and student outcomes (Oplatka & Arar, 2020). During challenging times, resilient principals maintain professional effectiveness, foster positive school climates, and manage stress more effectively (Fullan, 2020).

### ***Leadership resilience***

According to Witmer (2019), resilience refers to the strength to withstand challenges meant to disrupt a particular process. Therefore, in order to cultivate and sustain resilience, educational leaders need support systems that are based on psychological, social, and institutional protocols. Importantly, counselling, stress management training, and professional networks contribute to an individual's emotional and professional well-being (Beltman et al., 2011). In addition, effectively functioning school systems with adequate provision of resources, clearly articulated policies, and stable administrative support significantly enhance principals' abilities to manage the stressors and difficulties of their profession (Grissom & Loeb, 2011). According to Bush and Glover (2020), the enduring legacy of apartheid-generated educational disparities is also adding to a lingering issue that principals should be apt to struggle with radical resource shortages and infrastructure deficiencies. Furthermore, Moloi and Bush (2021) emphasised the complex socio-economic and social dynamics that affect the effectiveness of leadership and concluded that South African principals resort to collective and culturally responsive leadership strategies in order to deal with these problems. Similarly, Naidoo and Petersen (2022) proposed that South African principals adopt community-driven leadership strategies, emphasising collective engagement and collective accountability in fostering resilience and school performance. These context-specific analyses highlight the need for culturally and systemically responsive frameworks to address principals' mental health and resilience effectively. Despite these challenges, principals employ key resilience strategies to mitigate stress and sustain their leadership position. Many engage in personal wellness practices, such as physical activity, faith-based coping, and emotional regulation, to manage stress and prevent burnout. Moreover, peer collaboration

plays a crucial role, providing principals with collegial networks for emotional ventilation, problem-solving and mutual support. These practices align with *ubuntu*-informed leadership, which emphasises communal care and solidarity (Letseka, 2012). Additionally, ongoing professional development helps principals strengthen their adaptive capacities, although gaps remain in South African leadership training—particularly related to emotional competence and adversity management (Mestry & Grobler, 2004).

Collaborative leadership models further alleviate stress by distributing responsibilities across staff, thus fostering inclusivity and reducing role overload. Such approaches align with inclusive leadership frameworks that underscore shared decision-making (Naicker, 2014). However, while these individual and collective resilience strategies are vital, systemic barriers continue to persist. Excessive workloads, unclear role boundaries, and policy constraints continue to place a strain on principals, particularly in under-resourced settings (Ngcobo & Tikly, 2010). There is, therefore, a need for stronger institutional support, including coherent policy frameworks, equitable resource allocation, and structured mental health interventions. Ultimately, while principals demonstrate remarkable resilience through personal and professional strategies, systemic reforms are essential to help sustain their well-being. That said, without institutional changes such as improved leadership training, mental health support, and policy adjustments, the burden on principals in disadvantaged schools will remain untenable. Hence, a holistic approach that combines individual resilience-building with structural support is critical to fostering effective and sustainable school leadership.

## **Research method**

A qualitative approach using a phenomenological design was employed in this study to garner a more in-depth understanding of principals' lived experiences in rural schools. The study was underpinned by the interpretivist paradigm. This paradigm posits that reality can only be fully understood through subjective interpretations. The research site was conveniently sampled during an engaged scholarship project, *Asset Mapping: Breaking the Cycle of Poverty*, in which the researchers were involved. The study had a fixed sample of 15 participants who were all principals from rural high schools based in various provinces of South Africa. According to Guest et al. (2020) and Hennink and Kaiser (2022), qualitative research achieves saturation between nine and 17 interviews; therefore, this sample size was deemed adequate. Africans made up the majority (14) of the participants. Males accounted for the majority (12). Participants' ages ranged from 34 to 61 years. Their work experience as principals ranged from three to nine years. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants, while ethics considerations were also explained to the participants, including that participation was voluntary. Next, the QR code to access the online qualitative questionnaire was shared with the participants. The online questionnaire included a cover page, which detailed the purpose of the study, as well as ethical considerations. Participants were advised that by continuing to the next page, which had the questions, they gave their consent to participate in the study.

Qualitative data were collected by using an online qualitative questionnaire shared with QR codes, which provided participants with access to the questionnaire. The qualitative questionnaire asked open-ended questions relating to: (1) Mental health challenges questions; (2) Personal coping strategies; (3) External factors affecting leadership well-being; and (4) Recommendations for resilience support systems.

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. The analysis began with familiarisation, where the researchers read and re-read all participant responses to acquire a comprehensive understanding of principals' experiences regarding mental health challenges and leadership resilience. During this phase, preliminary patterns relating to stress, coping practices, and institutional support were noted.

In the second phase, initial codes were generated systematically across the dataset. Codes also captured key features of the data relevant to the research questions. Examples of initial codes included *work overload*, *resource shortages*, *lack of parental involvement*, *stress*, *peer collaboration*, and *psychological support*. These codes were then grouped into broader categories representing recurring patterns in the responses.

During the third phase, codes were organised into candidate themes reflecting shared meanings across participants' experiences. Next, four major themes were developed: overwhelming mental health challenges, personal coping mechanisms, the impact of external factors, and essential support systems.

Although the analysis remained primarily inductive, the interpretation of themes was informed by three complementary theoretical lenses: the conservation of resources (COR) theory, the transactional stress theory,

and the Ubuntu philosophy. The COR theory guided the identification of themes relating to resource depletion and protection, particularly where principals described stress arising from workload pressures, administrative demands, and resource shortages. The transactional stress theory informed the analysis of coping strategies by examining how principals appraised stressors and adopted behavioural responses, such as exercise, networking, and reflective practices, used to manage stress.

The Ubuntu philosophy guided the interpretation of relational and communal dimensions of leadership resilience. Data extracts emphasising collaboration with colleagues, community engagement, and shared responsibility for learner well-being were interpreted as expressions of relational leadership, consistent with Ubuntu values of collective support and interconnectedness. For example, participants' references to "talking with other principals" and "supporting child-headed families through community collaboration" were coded not only as coping strategies, but also as forms of communal resilience grounded in Ubuntu principles.

The final themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence, conceptual clarity, and alignment with both the dataset and the theoretical framework. Moreover, to ensure trustworthiness and rigour in this qualitative study, several strategies were implemented. Credibility was achieved through an in-depth understanding of participants' contexts and careful narrative interpretation (Kakar et al., 2021). Transferability was supported by rich descriptions of the setting, participants, and methods (Ahmed, 2024). Dependability was ensured through an audit trail of data collection and analysis (Stenfors et al. 2020). Confirmability was strengthened using triangulation, reflexive journaling, and audit trails to reduce bias (Ahmed, 2024). By employing these combined approaches, the study's validity and reliability were effectively reinforced, thereby ensuring robust and trustworthy results.

## **Ethics**

The research employed ethical guidelines, obtaining clearance from the University Research Ethics Committee. Participants were also appropriately informed of the study purpose. Additionally, the demographic data of the participants were stored securely to warrant reliability and ethical importance. Participant privacy was also accorded priority in the study, with the right to withdraw clearly explained and coercive elements avoided. Responses on questionnaires were anonymised to ensure participant identities were not compromised or disclosed, as all principals were assigned a pseudonym. For the purposes of increasing participant confidentiality, identifiable school names, locations, and sensitive information were omitted from the results.

## **Results and findings**

Upon analysing the data, themes, such as 1) overwhelming mental health challenges, 2) impact of external factors, 3) coping mechanisms, and 4) essential support systems, emerged from the data. These themes are discussed below, and it should be noted that participants' responses were quoted verbatim and include grammatical errors:

### ***Theme 1: Overwhelming mental health challenges***

Participants reported various worrying factors that negatively impact their ability to discharge their duties to their maximum level. Concerningly, these factors result in an unpleasant and less enjoyable working environment, while continuously challenging the participants' coping skills. Factors such as workloads, teachers' and learners' discipline, child-headed families, socio-economic status of families, alcohol abuse, parental involvement, teenage pregnancy, and inadequate resources were often blamed as sources of mental health challenges impacting participants. As such, these mental health challenges have manifested themselves through stress, anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion. The following sentiments were shared by some participants: Participant 12 stated that "My stress level is high because I am dealing with learners from the farms, child-headed families who bring with them worst psychosocial issues," while Participant 11 offered the following feedback: "My mental health is stake because I deal with Educator's comorbidities, stress, anxiety, depression and inadequate resources, etc." Participant 14 highlighted that, "We don't have all the resources that we need, and parents would be struggling to support the children." Similar concerns were raised by Participant 15: "I have stress caused by socio-economic challenges such as alcohol abuse by learners and parents, drug abuse by learners, lack of parental involvement, lack of interest for learning, child-headed families."

Based on various experiences of the participants, it appears that principals based in rural schools face numerous challenges that tend to lead to mental health challenges. Research indicates that principals from disadvantaged schools encounter demanding pressures and increasing accountability demands (Leithwood et al., 2020), which

could inadvertently result in mental health concerns such as chronic stress, anxiety, burnout, and emotional exhaustion (Day et al., 2021). If these mental health issues receive inadequate attention, Leithwood et al. (2020) warned that school principals are at risk of performing poorly and ineffectively. Similarly, continued exposure to mental health challenges could result in low morale (Meier & West, 2020; Ntsala et al., 2021) and deteriorated professional capabilities of principals (Oplatka & Arar, 2020). Therefore, during challenging times, principals should remain resilient and uphold high professional standards and effectiveness (Fullan, 2020). Thus, principals from these rural contexts should be empowered with the ability to navigate challenges while managing their own mental health.

### ***Theme 2: Impact of external factors***

Community dynamics, policy environment and resource constraints emerged as factors impacting the principals' mental health and leadership effectiveness. Participants also echoed their concerns regarding the lack of support and unrealistic expectations from various stakeholders. These concerns are shared by various participants, such as Participant 6, who said that, "There is lack of support by parents, political parties having ulterior interest, non-support by immediate supervisor always side with parents, wants to see faults on me. Unavailability of some resources, non-paying of school fees by parents," and Participant 9, "I have serious challenge because I battle to pay SGB employees month end from constrained financial resources. Also, community expectations are unrealistic and cause significant stress." Moreover, Participant 15 lamented that, "I get little support from the community, most of the time school programs are criticised. Departmental policies are inadequate to support and protect us." Participant 11 added to this by saying that, "There is lack of understanding and support from parents, this is frustrating. As the principal, I must manage according to policy, although challenges on the ground affects the school results negatively."

Furthermore, it seems that some elements, such as self-interest and self-gain, lead to the principals sensing less support from the community structures and departmental officials. From these findings, participants explicitly recognised the detrimental effects of unrealistic community expectations. The following concerns were registered by Participant 4: "The youth in the ward want to own the school, and that all projects should be given to them. We lack resources mostly because of burglaries. We lack support from the Department."

The popular African expression, "*it takes a village to raise a child*," seems to have been dishonoured in this instance. Evidently, participants feel that they bear the burden relating to managing the school operation with minimal or less support from relevant stakeholders. This lack of support has been constantly identified as a source of increased stress and mental health challenges suffered by the principals. In line with the findings of this study, literature blames factors such as a lack of basic sanitation infrastructure, inadequate physical resources, a lack of electricity, a lack of information and communication technology, and a lack of water, roads, and transport as sources of mental health challenges facing rural school principals (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Shikalepo, 2020). Additionally, the lack of resources, poverty, minimal parental involvement in children's education, limited funding, under-qualified educators, and multi-grade teaching have also been identified as factors exacerbating mental health challenges of principals based in rural environments (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Myende & Maifala, 2020; Ngozwana et al., 2024). In the same vein, Day et al. (2021) argued that rural principals are vulnerable to additional socio-economic challenges, community issues, and systemic resource deficits. Consequently, these conditions serve as an additional burden, leading to higher stress levels, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion, which, in turn, negatively affect the leadership capabilities of school principals (Moloi & Bush, 2021). Of particular concern, these factors seem to be a hindrance in schools' daily operations and effectiveness (Smit, 2017).

### ***Theme 3: Coping mechanisms***

It appears that schools in rural areas lack the structured support to assist participants in coping with their work challenges. Consequently, participants are reportedly devising personal coping strategies, such as physical exercise, social interactions, and reflective practices, in order to manage stress and enhance their mental well-being. This was recorded in various responses. Participant 6 explained, "I tend to sit in quiet spaces to reflect. I read motivational books, and I also sit in the staffroom and have informal conversations with staff," while Participant 9 stated, "I do regular exercise and spending quality time with family." Participant 8 relayed that "I talk with other principals and communicate with the district office," while Participant 12 said, "I network with other principals for emotional and professional support."

Hence, participants seem to be drawing their strength from social interaction and seeking support from peers and relevant officials. Thus, taking care of the physical well-being and improving family time seem to be one of the strategies deployed by the participants. Similarly, school principal resilience strategies and existing literature on mental health challenges were found to be significantly concordant in this study. Researchers have reported high stress levels and emotional exhaustion of principals, particularly in disadvantaged contexts (Day et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020). Under adverse conditions, educational leadership presents several challenges that confirm and extend prior understandings. However, despite these challenges, participants seem to be engaging in personal wellness practices, such as physical activity, faith-based coping, and emotional regulation, so as to manage stress and prevent burnout. Moreover, peer collaboration and professional networks emerged as popular coping mechanisms employed by the participants. These practices align with Ubuntu-informed leadership, which emphasises communal care and solidarity (Letseka, 2012). Additionally, ongoing professional development helps principals strengthen their adaptive capacities, even though gaps remain in South African leadership training—particularly in areas such as emotional competence and adversity management (Mestry & Grobler, 2004). In accordance with transactional stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), principals' coping strategies, such as meditation, exercise, and professional networking, reflect cognitive appraisal processes. As a result of cognitive and behavioural adaptations, stressors are mitigated through these individual coping mechanisms. Additionally, the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 2001) explained how principals maintain their resilience in conditions of chronic resource scarcity by preserving psychological and social resources. These findings identify communal and relational coping strategies, reflecting the Ubuntu philosophy (Nussbaum, 2003), underscoring collective problem-solving and communal support.

Importantly, the findings suggest that these theoretical dimensions do not operate independently but rather interact dynamically to shape leadership resilience. Moreover, resource constraints within disadvantaged schools, such as inadequate infrastructure, administrative overload, and limited institutional support, create conditions of resource depletion consistent with conservation of resources (COR) theory. These conditions also trigger cognitive appraisal processes described in transactional stress theory, where principals evaluate stressors and adopt coping strategies such as exercise, reflective practices, and peer networking. However, the data also show that several coping responses are embedded within relational contexts rather than purely individual processes. Principals frequently rely on peer collaboration, communication with district officials, and collective engagement with community stakeholders to manage pressures. In practice, resilience emerges through the interaction of resource management, cognitive appraisal, and communal support structures grounded in Ubuntu principles, rather than isolated coping mechanisms.

For example, when principals described communicating with other principals or engaging with district officials to manage school challenges, these responses illustrate the interaction of the three theoretical dimensions. The stressor arises from structural resource constraints within disadvantaged school environments (COR theory), the principal cognitively interprets and manages the stressor through adaptive coping responses (transactional stress theory), while the coping response involves relational support networks reflecting communal leadership practices associated with the Ubuntu philosophy.

#### ***Theme 4: Essential support systems***

Participants also identified support systems that enhance leadership resilience, including wellness programmes, psychological support, leadership training, administrative support, and effective school policies. Participant 11 stated that: “We need educator development workshops and educational platforms where we share our challenges as principals. We also need platforms where we can share best practices on leadership, have motivational sessions and team building sessions.” Participant 5 also explained that “There is a need to develop functional and effective school policies that speak to the needs of the school.”

Furthermore, there seems to be an outcry for relevant resources (physical and human) and collaboration with other departments. These sentiments are highlighted in the following statement:

There is a need to employ a school administrator and to intensify support from our sister departments, for instance, allocate a social worker to have office at school, police officer to be available when needed, allocate healthcare officer, provide security personnel 24/7. **(P15)**

Participant 14 also stressed the following: “We need motivation sessions and developmental programmes for school management team. The school leaders and school management teams should be equipped with resources like laptops and tablets.”

In this study, participants’ endorsement of structured mentorship, wellness programmes, and psychological support further demonstrates the importance of collective cultural practices for reinforcing resilience within schools. In the South African education context, resilience strategies have a unique cultural dimension. Previous literature has also acknowledged policy gaps and community pressure but rarely emphasised their explicit acknowledgement by principals themselves (Grissom & Loeb, 2011). As a result of this explicit awareness, principals have acquired a better understanding of how systemic pressures significantly affect their leadership experiences and resilience strategies. Moreover, participants highlighted a shortage of resources as one pressing issue that requires further attention. This shortage is acknowledged in literature by Bhana and Pillay (2021) as well as Moosa and Bhana (2020), who reported that African schooling environments encounter ongoing structural challenges, such as resource inequalities, policy violations, and infrastructural shortcomings that are beyond the influence and scope of school principals.

Due to the predominantly male sample, the findings have important implications for understanding men’s mental health within educational leadership. Most principals reported experiencing significant levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion, highlighting that male leaders are not immune to psychological strain, despite leadership roles often being associated with emotional self-sufficiency. These findings also challenge traditional assumptions that men in leadership positions are inherently resilient or less vulnerable to mental health pressures. Instead, the participants’ responses reveal that male principals actively rely on coping strategies, such as peer networking, social interaction, and reflective practices, to manage stress. This observation is particularly significant, as it disrupts prevailing gender stereotypes within educational leadership discourse, where vulnerability is often underrecognised or underreported among male leaders. As such, these findings suggest a need to normalise discussions around mental health among school leaders and recognise that resilience may involve acknowledging vulnerability and seeking relational support rather than maintaining traditional notions of masculine self-reliance.

Taken together, these findings illustrate how leadership resilience in disadvantaged schools is shaped by the interaction of psychological coping processes, structural resource constraints, and communal support systems. Principals must simultaneously manage personal stress, institutional limitations, and community expectations while maintaining effective school leadership. However, by integrating conservation of resources (COR) theory, transactional stress theory, and Ubuntu philosophy, this study provides a multidimensional understanding of how principals navigate these pressures. Thus, these findings expand existing research by demonstrating that leadership resilience in disadvantaged school environments is not solely an individual psychological capacity but emerges through the combined influence of resource management, cognitive coping processes, and relational support networks embedded within the school community.

### ***Contribution of the study***

Collectively, these findings lead to a more in-depth understanding of resilience processes in low-socio-economic schools and encourage a multidimensional approach to principals’ mental health concerns. The study reasserts the overall greatest need for systemic support across the board, culturally responsive intervention, and targeted psychological services to develop leadership resilience in high-pressure school contexts. While the findings of this study are based on the experiences of 15 principals working in disadvantaged rural schools, the pressures identified, such as resource scarcity, community expectations, and socio-economic challenges, are not unique to the South African education system. Similar leadership challenges have been reported in disadvantaged educational contexts across many parts of the Global South and other under-resourced schooling environments (Day et al., 2021; Oplatka & Arar, 2020). Consequently, the resilience strategies identified in this study, including peer support networks, reflective coping practices, and structured leadership development programmes, may be relevant to school leaders operating in comparable contexts characterised by resource constraints and community-based pressures. However, it is also important to recognise that leadership experiences are shaped by regional and institutional contexts. Provincial governance structures, policy implementation practices, and community dynamics may influence how principals experience stress and develop resilience strategies (Bush & Glover, 2020; Ngcobo & Tikly, 2010). Therefore, while the findings provide valuable insights into leadership resilience in disadvantaged schools, their transferability should be interpreted in relation to specific contextual conditions

across diverse educational systems, consistent with qualitative research principles that stress contextual transferability rather than statistical generalisation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### ***Limitations of the study***

In this study, data were collected using a qualitative questionnaire, which limited two-way interaction between the researcher and the participants. Although this approach enabled the collection of data from principals across different schools in a practical and time-efficient manner, it restricted the opportunity for probing, follow-up questions, and clarification of participants' responses. Therefore, some experiences and perspectives may not have been explored in a more in-depth level, which is typically possible through semi-structured interviews or other interactive qualitative methods.

Another limitation concerns the study's sampling strategy. The study relied on convenience sampling, which introduces the possibility of selection bias. Accordingly, principals who were willing to participate may differ systematically from those who declined participation. For example, principals experiencing severe burnout, time constraints, or institutional pressures may have been less likely to participate. As a result, the findings should be interpreted as reflecting the perspectives of participating principals rather than representing all principals working in disadvantaged school environments.

Moreover, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be influenced by participants' subjective perceptions and interpretations of their experiences. Although the qualitative approach provided valuable insights into principals' experiences, the reliance on self-reported data tends to limit the generalisability of the findings. Furthermore, the study did not explore whether resilience strategies influenced principals' leadership performance over time or their long-term mental health outcomes.

Finally, the gender composition of the sample represents an additional limitation. Of the 15 principals who participated in the study, 12 were male, and only three were females. This imbalance may influence the perspectives captured in the findings. For example, masculine norms surrounding leadership and emotional expression may shape how male principals describe stress, coping, and resilience, potentially resulting in resilience strategies that reflect predominantly masculine interpretations of leadership and coping. As a result, the themes identified in this study may not fully capture the experiences and coping strategies of female principals.

### ***Direction for future research***

Given the limitations of this study, future research could employ interview-based or mixed-method qualitative approaches to allow for a richer exploration of principals' lived experiences and the ways in which leadership resilience develops in disadvantaged school contexts. Additionally, future studies could adopt longitudinal designs to examine how resilience strategies evolve and how they affect leadership effectiveness and well-being over extended periods. Finally, future research should aim for more gender-balanced samples to explore whether resilience strategies differ across genders in disadvantaged school contexts.

### ***Managerial implications***

Principals could benefit from tailored mental health and resilience training within the Department of Basic Education's current psychosocial initiatives. This type of training can address mental health and foster resilience through targeted professional development, access to mental health resources, and community partnerships. During these sessions, participants could attend mental health and resilience-building workshops that emphasise practical coping strategies such as mindfulness, stress management, and peer support. Teacher Well-being Seminars could also be incorporated into structured monthly workshops offered online. Providing training on mental health awareness and resilience-building strategies equips principals to better support their staff and learners. It is also important to integrate formal mentorship and peer support networks into the virtual Psychosocial Support Programme. Thus, by providing guidance, sharing successful stress management strategies, and offering emotional support, experienced principals can serve as mentors for new or less experienced principals. For example, provincial education departments could facilitate formal mentor-mentee relationships through virtual meetings. Furthermore, these findings indicate that mental health interventions should specifically address male principals' experiences and promote accessible, stigma-free psychosocial support. Additionally, establishing partnerships with local health services and organisations can enhance access to counselling and mental health programmes. More specifically, encouraging a culture of open communication and peer support within schools further strengthens resilience and mental well-being. Furthermore, it is imperative, from a policy perspective, that

clear guidelines and resource allocation plans are developed and communicated effectively to principals in order to mitigate workload pressures. In order to improve policy effectiveness, the Basic Education Department should clearly define realistic leadership and administrative expectations. In school environments, culturally responsive leadership frameworks should be explicitly based on the Ubuntu philosophy to strengthen community-based support structures and collective problem-solving capacities.

## Conclusion

This study contributes to understanding leadership resilience in disadvantaged school contexts by highlighting how principals navigate mental health pressures arising from resource scarcity, socio-economic challenges, and community expectations. By integrating the conservation of resources theory (COR), transactional stress theory, and Ubuntu philosophy, the study provides a multidimensional perspective on how psychological coping processes, structural constraints, and relational support systems interact to shape leadership resilience.

The findings suggest that strengthening principals' resilience requires more than individual coping strategies; it also demands systemic interventions that support school leaders operating in high-pressure environments. Therefore, education departments and school governing bodies should prioritise leadership development programmes, structured mentorship initiatives, and accessible mental health support services for principals working in disadvantaged schools. Moreover, policy frameworks should align with the realities of under-resourced schooling environments in order to ensure that accountability expectations are matched with adequate institutional support. In summary, future research could build on these findings by conducting comparative studies across provinces or educational systems to further explore how contextual factors influence leadership resilience and mental health among school leaders in disadvantaged contexts.

## Declarations

**Interdisciplinary Scope:** The study has drawn on theories and methods from fields such as education, psychology, organisational behaviour, as well as leadership and management. This approach integrates insights from these disciplines to explore the multifaceted nature of mental health and leadership resilience in the education context.

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